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ABSTRACT

Because religious communicators deal with issues most profound and consequential to their audiences, it is imperative that they examine their motives, aspirations, and rhetorical methods, as well as the ethical dimensions of their communication. Religion operates, along with every other rhetorical system, in the world of contingency, of the probable rather than the absolute. However, religious truths depend for their propagation upon the communicator, who must correlate appearances with reality. Audiences, as a result, continually make comparisons between the value systems of persuaders and the religious ideas they promote. The ethical dilemma is the proper relative adjustment of means to end. A balance can be reached if all of the likely consequences are taken into account, if the ethical desirability of both means and end are considered, and if the probability exists of achieving the desired end with the available rhetorical means. (MAI)

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AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR THE RELIGIOUS PERSUADER

Ray D. Dearin*

Steven S. Gaines begins his biography of Marjoe Gortner by describing the child-evangelist's first lesson in sermon preparation at the hands of his mother Marge:

> She sat the three-year-old in a tiny club chair with a flowered print slip cover. He squirmed for a moment until he nestled obediently into the seat. Then he stared at his hands, which he kept clasped in his lap. She gently lifted his chin with her hand until their eyes were level. The intensity of her gaze warned him that what was happening was important.
>
> Seated across from him she began reading aloud a four-minute sermon. Then she explained the Bible verses it was based on, and asked him if he understood. He shook his head. She read the sermon again, repeating each line over and over. Then he repeated each line after her, not in his natural voice, but in a chesty roar, imitating her perfect diction. In twenty minutes his attention lagged.
>
> Lifting him by the seat of his pants she took him to the kitchen sink and let cold water run over his head. He was gasping for breath when she turned off the tap, dried him, and put him back in his little chair. The reading-repeating session began again. In a half hour his gaze wandered. She lifted him again, took him to the sofa, and held a pillow over his face until he begged to go back to his chair. After the first day, punishments were no longer necessary, and she trained him five hours a day for four weeks. Finally the child had perfectly memorized his first sermon.[1]

Although he was only three years old, this was not little Marjoe's first training in religious persuasion. Before he learned to say "mama" and "papa," he was taught "glory" and "hallelujah," and by the time he was nine months old, his mother had taken him onto radio talk shows and trained him to shout "Glory" into the microphone. The spectacle of a small boy mechanically drilled in the methods of mass arousal through stage-managed and meticulously memorized theatrical performances obviously raises alarming questions about the role of ethics in religious communication. Such questions arise concerning the persuasion — some would call it "mind control" or psychological coercion — of the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Children of God movement, Hare Krishna, or even the evangelism of Billy Graham. Indeed, it has been questioned whether any persuasion

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is ever ethical in religion, just as the morality of persuasion itself has been assailed.

The point of view taken in this paper is that the attempt to influence attitudes, beliefs, and actions is a necessary and worthwhile part of religious dialogue, that it is implied by a proper understanding of religion itself, and that arguments to the contrary are self-defeating. Nevertheless, religious rhetoric, like all communication, is subject to abuse when moral constraints are violated. Moreover, religious persuasion, for reasons to be adduced, seems especially to invite such violations.

The purpose of this paper is not to set forth a code of limitations which should circumscribe the rhetorical ends and means of every religious persuader; nor is it to derive an ethic from the tenets of a specific religion. To do so would be to invite an endless list of such ethics: a Christian ethic, a Buddhist ethic, a Confucian ethic, and so forth. Rather, I hope to contribute to a way of looking at the ethical dimension of religious communication that will have broad application to the teacher, as well as to the practitioner, of religious persuasion. My purpose, in brief, is to offer a perspective, not a set of guidelines.

1.

To begin with, the terms "ethics" and "religion" need to be defined. Ethics deals with moral judgments about what is right or wrong. Concerning the relation of ethics to morality, E. S. Ames says:

> Morality may be defined as a type of conduct which is conscious of the ends it seeks in comparison with other competing ends. Deliberation and choice are involved. Morality is criticized, enlightened conduct. Ethics is the science of such conduct, and its function is to review all phases of moral behavior, inquiring into the conditions, motives, ends, and values of action. Morality will be considered in this way as the active, practical, enlightened form of human living, while ethics is the science concerned with the process of this enlightenment.[2]

For Ames, ethics and morality are concerned entirely with horizontal relationships between man and man, whereas religion "has a perpendicular plan, taking account also of man's relation to God. Morality is of time; religion includes eternity; morality ends with the horizon; religion extends to infinity."[3] Other ethicists agree that religion transcends purely human relationships. George W. Knox calls it "the recognition of super-sensible realities as superior and worshipful."[4]

Ira W. Howerth defines religion as "the effective desire to be in right relations to the power manifesting itself in the universe."[5] And Josiah Royce says:

> Religion, in its higher sense, constitutes the most important business of the human being, and by Religion, in its higher sense, I mean the consciousness of practical relations to a real but at present unseen spiritual order, whose authority as furnishing the rule for our conduct is conceived as absolute, and whose worth and dignity we recognize as above every other worth and dignity known to us.[6]

To the degree that these definitions are valid, sustained dialogue and persuasion about religious doctrines, demands, and urgencies will become increasingly inevitable. Because religion is "a dogma upon which to organize one's destiny," as Walter Lippmann once characterized it, it is senseless to expect a believer not to seek its promulgation. Indeed, as Kenneth Burke points out, "religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion."[7]

2.

To assert that religion is inherently persuasive does not, of course, establish that it should be. However, the religious rhetor is apt to agree with the argument advanced by Aristotle and echoed by Augustine in his treatise, On Christian Doctrine:

> For since by means of the art of rhetoric both truth and falsehood are urged, who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art?[8]

All the devices of persuasion available to the proponents of error, Augustine goes on to say, can rightfully be used by Christians to refute error. As a corollary, it follows that an ethic of religious persuasion must recognize the legitimacy of any rhetorical methods that would be acceptable if used in secular persuasion. No valid reason exists, in other words, for excluding practices which would pass ethical scrutiny if used for other persuasive ends, as in advertising, political campaigning, and the like. From a philosophical standpoint, a double standard would be irrational.

Nonetheless, people do expect higher rules of conduct to be met by religious communicators. Perhaps audiences have come to expect and even tolerate a measure of deception and puffery in persuasion for commercial profit or vote-getting. But the exposure of religious charlatans is almost always deadly. Thus, little Marjoe

Gortner was conditioned to insist that his carefully memorized sermons were completely "extemporaneous" — a very uncommon word in a five-year-old's vocabulary.

Why are ethical lapses so devastating to a religious rhetor? Part of the answer lies, without doubt, in the chasm that can develop between the ideals espoused by the persuader and the methods used to promote those ideals. When the discrepancy is too great, the speaker's credibility is destroyed and his cause suffers. Furthermore, there are intrinsic tendencies of religious communication which place exceptional stress upon its ethical dimension. For one thing, even though a religion makes universal and absolute claims upon its adherents and seeks to relate personal destinies to a world order, it operates, along with every other rhetorical system, in the world of contingency, of the probable rather than the absolute. "If we must never act except on the certain," writes Pascal, "we ought not act on religion; for it is not certain."[9] Although religious persuasion aspires to the enforcement of the deepest realities, it invariably gets tangled up with appearances. "Even honest rhetoric is fundamentally concerned with appearances," as Donald Bryant puts it. "Rhetoric at the command of honest men strives that what is desirable shall appear desirable, that what is vicious shall appear vicious. It intends that the true or probably true shall seem so, that the false or doubtful shall be vividly realized for what it is."[10] The fact that religious truths depend for their propagation upon the communicator, who must struggle to correlate appearances with reality, thus accounts for the comparison audiences continually make between the personal frame of reference or value system of a persuader, as signified by his rhetorical choices, and the religious cosmology which he promotes.

3.

These foregoing considerations are sufficient, I think, to enable us to locate the crux of the ethical dilemma facing the religious persuader. This problem, it seems to me, is the proper relative adjustment of means to end.

In a 1954 convention paper, later published as "An Ethical Basis of Communication," Karl Wallace said: "The problem is essentially this: Does the end warrant our using any means which seem likely to achieve it? Is the public speaker or debater who

believes his purpose worthy justified in using any methods and techniques which he thinks would be successful?"[11] To paraphrase Wallace, we might ask, "Is the religious persuader who fervently believes his purpose to be the salvation of souls free to use any means that may be successful?" Wallace's thesis was that there are ethical standards which should control any rhetorical situation, and that "ethical standards of communication should place emphasis upon the means used to secure the end, rather than upon achieving the end itself."[12] He went on to locate the basis of ethical communication in the values implicit in a free society: fair play in treating fact and opinion, revealing sources of information, and so on.

While the complete suppression of the rhetorical purpose as moral justification serves adequately as a guide to ethical speaking in a democratic society committed to freedom of inquiry, this standard is apt to fail when men are passionately loyal to an idea transcending their highest political values, and upon which they predicate their hope of personal salvation. And it hardly needs to be pointed out that religious persuasion routinely occurs in this climate of passion and commitment.

Other theorists have insisted that "the purpose of persuasion can be a sound justification of the techniques used to reach it."[13] "If the end does not justify the means, what can?"[14] ask Brembeck and Howell. They believe that, "Studied in context, the end can serve as a most excellent and meaningful check upon the ethical legitimacy of the means."[15] However, these authors go on to warn that "highly moral, imperative purposes encourage laxity in choice of means.... The zealous proponent of a good cause must continually review his methods to be sure that he is not slipping into short-cut practices he himself would condemn when used for a lesser purpose."[16] Unfortunately, this advice does not answer the question, "When does the end justify the means?"

4.

This paper takes the position that judgments about ethics in religious rhetoric should consider both ends and means, and that ethical persuaders should seek a proper equilibrium between the two. Ethical decisions cannot be made easily by rule of thumb,

or by reference to maxims or truisms. Adages such as those which forbid the use of excessive emotion in sermons — death-bed stories, frightening descriptions of hell, and so forth — are practically worthless without a consideration of the ends sought by the preacher. In this connection, I am reminded of Richard Weaver's justification of Daniel Webster's emotional description of the murder in the Knapp-White case. Weaver said:

> By depicting the scene in this fulness of detail Webster is making it vivid, and 'vivid' means 'living.' There are those who object on general grounds to this sort of dramatization; it is too affecting to the emotions. Beyond a doubt, whenever a rhetorician actualizes an event in this manner, he is making it mean something to the emotional part of us, but that part is involved whenever we are deliberating about goodness and badness. On this subject there is a very wise reminder in Bishop Whately's Elements of Rhetoric: 'When feelings are strongly excited, they are not necessarily over-excited; it may be that they are only brought to the state which the occasion fully justifies, or even that they fall short of this.'[17]

As Weaver implies, the ethical test must be whether the means used are justified in relation to the end sought.

As a tool for arriving at a stable equilibrium between the purpose of the religious persuader and the means used to achieve it, let us consider this tentative principle advanced by H. Gomperz: "The end justifies the means when the former is more desirable than the latter are undesirable."[18] This principle is not completely satisfactory, for it tends to presuppose that both ends and means can be judged in a contextual vacuum. Actually, of course, when a communicator uses certain rhetorical techniques and methods, these devices are likely to have consequences far beyond the narrow range of ends-means relationships which he envisages at the time. Moreover, all persuasion, to be ethical, should involve a consideration of all possible effects, not just the one or few goals sought in the immediate context. Joseph L. Allen, in an article, "The Relation of Strategy and Morality," makes this point:

> The moral demand upon the strategist ... is one that considers both ends and means in interrelation. It requires, first, that he respect the inclusive realm of ends — all the creatures affected by the action.... It requires, second, that he conduct the means ... with constant reference to the many ends. It cannot rightly be said that 'the end justifies the means,' for that cliché implies the notion that one can disregard all other ends that the means may adversely affect. But it can be said that the whole realm of ends justifies the means that will maximize its well-being, for that statement embodies continuous awareness of ends at every point along the road of strategy.[19]

Although Allen is writing of all strategic thinking, including the political and military kinds, this analysis is germane to rhetorical strategy as well. And for the religious rhetor, it entails that consideration not be given exclusively to a narrow end or range of ends, no matter how urgent or cosmic in importance they are thought to be. The persuader will have to consider not only the goal of proselytizing or evangelizing (or whatever the immediate purpose involves), but also the long-range effects of his rhetorical methods upon the welfare of his audience, as well as upon bystanders who may observe his rhetoric, and upon the whole field of religious and secular discourse. Toward all of these ends he has a responsibility.

One other dimension of the means-end equilibrium needs to be considered: the degree of confidence which we can have in the causal relations operating between our rhetorical methods and their consequences. Although the religious persuader may be motivated by religious conceptions that have, for him, universal and absolute claims, his rhetoric, like all rhetoric, is shot through with probabilities. And even though faith may lead him to hold his religious premises as certain, he must be aware that as a persuader his knowledge of human psychology, and of the potential effects of his rhetorical choices, can never be known with assurance. Concerning the probabilities inherent in these choices, Gomperz says:

> ... the undesirable means will always be more certain than the desirable end. Humanly speaking, when we decide to do something undesirable in itself, we may be pretty sure it will be done; but we may never be as sure that the desirable end for the sake of which we are doing it will actually be realized. It is up to us to shoot or not to shoot; but once it is shot, the bullet is out of our reach. Hence, the rule may be deduced: Other things being equal, avoid using undesirable means![20]

To sum up, if the ethical desirability of both the end and means is taken into account, if the whole range of likely consequences is considered carefully, and if the probability of actually achieving the desired end with the available rhetorical means is weighed, then an ethical balance ought to be reached. Only by calculating, as well as is humanly possible, the various elements of this equilibrium can the religious persuader be said to meet the ethical demands of communication.

5.

There is a certain audacity in all persuasion. Philosopher B. J. Diggs has written that "One who does more [than offer advice] has a greater responsibility. When one attempts to persuade, he presumes to tell another what he should believe or how he ought to act: he is not just offering help; he, so to speak, has made another's decision of what to believe or do for him, and is trying to get the other to accept the decision."[21] As Diggs recognized, one's natural enthusiasm about his cause can easily lead him to seek to impose it on others. Daniel Defoe expressed this sentiment pointedly in a couplet:

> Nature hath left this tincture in the blood
> That all men would be tyrants if they could.

In religious communication, perhaps more than in any other kind, the danger of tyrannizing one's audience is great, for with the fervency of faith can come a corresponding inattention to the techniques and strategies of communication. In short, the relation of means to end becomes obscured or distorted, and ethical lapses result.

Because the religious communicator treats of the issues most profound and consequential to his audience, it behooves him to examine his motives, aspirations, and rhetorical methods, as well as the truth and righteousness of his message. This latter examination entails a searching quest for theological insight and spiritual truth. And the former examination, it has been my purpose to show, can be assisted by a study of both the rhetorical and the ethical dimensions of communication.

Notes

[1]Steven S. Gaines, Marjoe: The Life of Marjoe Gortner (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 1-2.

[2]Edward Scribner Ames, "Religion and Morality," International Journal of Ethics, XXXVIII (April, 1928), 295.

[3]Ibid., 298.

[4]George W. Knox, "Religion and Ethics," International Journal of Ethics, XII (April, 1902), 301.

[5]Ira W. Howerth, "What Is Religion," International Journal of Ethics, XIII (January, 1903), 205.

[6]Josiah Royce, "What Should Be the Attitude of Teachers of Philosophy Towards Religion?" International Journal of Ethics, XIII (April, 1903), 280.

[7]Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. v.

[8]St. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., in Readings in Classical Rhetoric, ed. Thomas W. Benson and Michael H. Prosser (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969), pp. 134-135.

[9]Blaise Pascal, "Pensées," Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal (Paris: Librarie Hachette, 1921), n. 234.

[10]Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX (December, 1953), 409.

[11]Karl R. Wallace, "An Ethical Basis of Communication," in Speeches for Illustration and Example, ed. Goodwin F. Berquist, Jr. (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1965), p. 181.

[12]Ibid., p. 183.

[13]Winston L. Brembeck and William S. Howell, "The Ethics of Persuasion," in Ethics and Persuasion: Selected Readings, ed. Richard L. Johannesen (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 14.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[17]Richard M. Weaver, "Language Is Sermonic," in Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 219.

[18]H. Gomperz, "When Does the End Sanctify the Means?" Ethics, LIII (April, 1943), 173.

[19]Joseph L. Allen, "The Relation of Strategy and Morality," Ethics, LXXIII (April, 1963), 173.

[20]Gomperz, p. 182.

[21]B. J. Diggs, "Persuasion and Ethics," Quarterly Journal of Speech, L (December, 1964), 364.